

Los Angeles Times

Region Needs \$6 Billion for Aviation, Study Says

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The recommendations aim to ease strain on LAX as air traffic doubles by 2030.

By Jennifer Oldham

Southern California will have to spend almost \$6 billion to build terminals, roadways and parking garages at nine regional airports to handle twice as many air passengers in 25 years, a new study has found.

If cities, counties and airport agencies from Victorville to Riverside and Palm Springs to Long Beach do not construct facilities, the region will be able to accommodate only 67% of the 170 million annual passengers expected by 2030, a report commissioned by the Southern California Assn. of Governments concluded.

The findings underscore the cost of building a regional system to take pressure off aging Los Angeles International Airport, which already handles 40% more travelers than it was designed to serve.

The \$11-billion modernization plan for LAX was not included in the study because officials said the expansion is designed to limit the airport to 78 million annual passengers. LAX is expected to handle about 62 million travelers this year.

The proposed spending on new facilities would give Southern California the equivalent of airports the size of Oakland's, Sacramento's and San Francisco's surrounding the Los Angeles region.

But making these improvements happen could be tricky.

Three inland airports, all former military bases, would need \$2.4 billion to expand to handle 20.7 million passengers a year by 2030. None has scheduled passenger service now. And airlines have balked at moving their operations from LAX, where they have spent years engineering complex flight schedules to ferry passengers all over the world.

"They're not going to build those facilities unless there's a demand for them," said Jessica Soltz Rudd, senior director of Fitch Ratings' airport group. But she said if officials can prove that the local economy can support new flights and if carriers pledge to bring service, funding to build airports is available.

The report, which is an appendix of a much larger analysis titled "Regional Airport Management Study" by Citigroup Technologies Corp., revived the debate over the accuracy of SCAG's air passenger predictions. The planning agency does not have any authority to enforce its findings.

Officials would need to spend \$1.08 billion to build a terminal, parking facilities, a second runway and road improvements at San Bernardino International Airport (formerly Norton Air Force Base). These upgrades would prepare it to handle 8.7 million annual passengers by 2030, authors found.

But local officials disputed that number.

"We don't have the airspace to handle more than about 2.8 million passengers a year," said Eric Ray, airport operations manager, who added that officials are finishing a new runway at the facility and have been aggressively marketing it to cargo carriers.

If airlines chose to fly larger planes that held more people, the airport, 60 miles east of Los Angeles, could theoretically handle more travelers, he said.

Some airport operators said that they planned to spend even more money than was included in SCAG estimates and that they hoped to exceed the agency's predictions for passenger growth.

At Palm Springs International Airport, officials expect to spend \$32 million over the next three years to build an eight-gate terminal and make airfield improvements. They hope to add a \$20-million air traffic control tower in coming years.

An airport official said the SCAG predictions might "undershoot by a considerable amount" the number of travelers who use Palm Springs in the future.

"If you look at our market, we service an area of about 600,000 people, and we're growing by 14% annually," said Richard Walsh, the airport's director of aviation. "That's about 25,000 new residents a year moving out here."

Some other capital improvements at regional airports suggested in the study:

- Bob Hope: \$20 million to upgrade taxiways and ramps and to demolish three structures on the south end of the Burbank airfield to provide up to five aircraft parking spaces.
- John Wayne: \$200 million for a six-gate terminal. Airport officials say they hope to spend \$437 million in the next five years to build the terminal and two parking structures, and to improve the airfield.
- Long Beach: \$7 million for an upgraded terminal and additional vehicle parking. The study concedes that this figure "could be significantly higher at the conclusion of this project."
- March Inland Port: \$800 million for a freeway interchange, parking and rental car facilities, a terminal and airfield improvements at the former Air Force base in Riverside County.
- Ontario International: \$1.5 billion for another terminal, vehicle parking, and road and airfield improvements. The city's airport agency has an agreement with carriers that when Ontario serves 10 million passengers two years in a row it will consider building another terminal. The airport grew by a million travelers, to 7 million a year, from 1990 to 2005.
- Palmdale Regional: \$1.61 billion for a terminal and office space for customs and security officials, and freeway interchange work. Currently, one carrier provides service to Las Vegas from this airport.
- Southern California Logistics: \$577 million for a terminal, passenger parking, and road and airfield improvements to serve 4 million travelers a year by 2030. Officials at the Victorville airport (formerly George Air Force Base) say they are focusing on cargo service and have no plans to fly passengers from the facility, 85 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

SCAG officials said the study is a starting point for officials to create a regional system, adding that they expect Los Angeles' airport agency to take the lead in encouraging airlines to spread flights among the agency's three commercial airports: LAX, Ontario and Palmdale.

"We're not proposing to impose anything on anybody," said Hasan Ikhata, director of transportation planning and policy at SCAG. "We're saying it makes economic and business sense for these other airports to expand."

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Airport expansion

To prepare for an expected doubling of air passengers in Southern California to 170 million a year by 2030, officials at nine regional airports must raise nearly \$6 billion to pay for new terminals, parking garages and airfield improvements.